

LUKE 15:1-10
ST JAMES'; 11.9.16; 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

A young boy called John, from a non-Christian family, used to go to Sunday School. He was very chuffed when it came to the annual prize-giving, and his Mum and his brother went along with him. They sat right in the very front row.

It was a guest service, and the speaker was someone very well-known. He began by asking, "Have you ever been lost?" John's brother stood up, and said loudly, "No, but *he* has!"

A few weeks before Joel's 4th birthday, we were visiting friends in Norwich. One afternoon, there was a group of about 8 of us in the city centre together. We stopped for a moment to work out which direction we should go in next – and then I looked round and realised that Joel had disappeared! That was really scary, because there were lots of people in every direction. Luckily we found him again only a few minutes later, but it was a horrible few minutes!

Those are two of my stories about being lost! I'm sure everyone here could add their own! In the passage from Luke's gospel this morning, Jesus told two stories about being lost and found. I want us to think about what it means both to be lost and to have lost something or someone; and then I want us to think about what it means to be found, or to find the lost thing or person.

THE MISERY OF BEING LOST

Being lost is a miserable experience! It may only be frustrating, or it may be terrifying, but either way, it's miserable. Jesus tells these stories in reply to the grumbles of the Pharisees and teachers of the law that he's welcoming *sinners* and eating with them (v 2). The tax-collectors were considered to be traitors: they helped the Romans to run the country, and cheated their fellow-countrymen. *Sinners* were people who were immoral, or people whose occupations were considered to be incompatible with the Law; they included shepherds, because their work prevented them from observing the Jewish ceremonial law.

It's clear that when Jesus talks about 'the lost', he's talking about these people. They know how it feels to be 'lost' in a spiritual sense; they haven't been able to take part in the spiritual life of their nation. Most of them probably didn't want to; but now some of them have realised that their lives are empty, and they've taken the first step back towards God. When we're lost in a literal sense, we're much more likely to be found once we realise that we're lost. The same is true in a spiritual sense. The sinners to whom Jesus is speaking have realised that they're lost, and they've begun to do something about it. Jesus tells these stories to show that God won't just welcome them back - even the Pharisees believed that God would welcome back repentant sinners. Jesus tells these stories to show that God actively goes out to look for people who are lost, and to bring them home to him.

People who are spiritually lost are like the lost sheep in the first story. Sheep wander from one patch of grass to the next, only seeing what's immediately in front of them. A lost sheep will carry on like this, hour after hour, and never realise that it's not where it should be, that it's wandering further and further away from the rest of its flock, and from the field where it would be safe. Only if it puts its foot down a rabbit hole, or gets caught in a thorn-bush, will it realise that something's wrong, and start bleating for help. In the same way, people who are spiritually lost will go on wandering further and further away from God, and never even realise that they're lost. They'll only start calling for help when something really goes wrong, and they suddenly realise that their lives are empty, and they can't do anything about it themselves; that they're alone, and that there's no-one around who can help them.

If people who are spiritually lost are like sheep, then God's like a shepherd. When a shepherd realises that one of his sheep is missing, he leaves all his other sheep safely in the field, and he goes off to look for the one that's got lost. If it's got itself trapped, then he might hear it bleating for help. But the lost sheep might still be wandering from one patch of grass to another, totally unaware that it's lost. Either way, the shepherd keeps on looking 'til he finds it. In the same way, God's always searching for people who've got lost. He doesn't just wait for them to find their way home; he goes out and he actively looks for them, and he doesn't stop until he finds them.

People who are spiritually lost are like the lost coin in the second story. Coins are lifeless; they can't move, they can't find their own way back,

and they can't even bleat for help like a lost sheep. In the same way, from the point of view of the Spirit, people who are spiritually lost are as lifeless as a coin. They can't move, they can't find their own way back, and they can't even call for help.

If people who are spiritually lost are like coins, then God's like the woman who lights a lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds her lost coin. The coin is valuable: it's the equivalent of a day's wages, and so for a poor woman, it's a lot of money. It doesn't matter how long it takes her to find it; it doesn't matter how much lamp-oil she burns - and her house wouldn't have had any windows, so it would have been dark inside, even during the day-time. In the same way, a lost person is valuable to God; it doesn't matter how long it takes him to find that person; it doesn't matter what else it takes: God will go on searching until he finds the one who's lost.

THE JOY OF BEING FOUND

We all know or can imagine the relief and the joy of being found when we've been lost. The sheep in Jesus' story would be able to tell us something about it! I can remember the joy and the relief when I realised for the first time that God loved *me* and accepted *me*, that I could be a member of his family even though I was far from perfect. And I'm sure that every believer here this morning could tell a similar story.

When we lost Joel in Norwich that time, we had a huge sense of relief and joy when we found him again! I'm sure many of you have had a very similar experience at some time or other. And that will give you a

tiny glimpse of God's joy when he finds one of his children. We read here about the angels of God rejoicing when a sinner repents. In other words, there's a great big party in heaven every time someone turns away from their sin, and turns to God.

At the end of the first story, the shepherd says *Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep* (v 6) - that is, one sheep out of 100 - and Jesus says, *in the same way there will be . . . rejoicing in heaven* (v 7). At the end of the second story, the woman says, *Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin* (v 9), and Jesus says, *in the same way . . . there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God* (v 10) . . . The woman had lost not 1/100th of her silver, but 1/10th, and so her joy must have been 10 times that of the shepherd who'd lost his sheep. But even that's not strong enough to show us how much God rejoices when a rebellious child turns to him. Immediately after these two stories follows the story of the lost son. God's joy can only be likened to that of the father at the return of his son, the return of *half* his family. The celebrations at the return of the lost son give us some idea of the celebrations in heaven over *one sinner who repents*.

CONCLUSION

Isn't it encouraging to know how the angels in heaven rejoiced when we became Christians? And isn't it great to know that God loves even us enough to search for us, and to rejoice when he finds us? We have so much to thank God for!

But there's a very real way in which we're nothing like the sheep, or the coins. We can't let someone else do all the searching and finding.

Once God's found us, we're a member of his family, part of his body. He shows his love for other people through us. And so it's up to *us* to carry on the work, the work of continually seeking those who are lost, and bringing them home. No matter what it costs us in time, in effort, or in any other way, we're called to go and tell our families, our friends and our neighbours the good news that God loves each one of them, and that he's waiting impatiently to welcome them, he's waiting impatiently to throw a party in heaven to celebrate their coming home.